

# KentuckyHistoricalSociety

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## African American Research in Kentucky

African Americans have a long association with Kentucky. In 1751, a black servant in the company of Christopher Gist came into the territory along the Ohio River. A slave guided Daniel Boone across the Blue Ridge Mountains in 1760. In the earliest attempts at settlement, African Americans accompanied whites onto the Kentucky frontier. Both blacks and whites faced the dangers and hardships of settling a new land. A slave named Pompey, who lived with the Indians, served as translator between the Shawnee chief, Blackfish, and Daniel Boone. Another African American of the Kentucky frontier was Monk Estill, a slave who aided the Kentucky settlers by manufacturing gunpowder for Fort Boonesborough and Estill's Station.

The early history of African Americans in Kentucky is closely associated with the institution of slavery. By 1790, Kentucky was home to 11,830 slaves and 114 free blacks. By 1860, the slave population reached 225,483, with a free black population of 10,684. During the Civil War, thousands of black Kentuckians fought for the Union cause. By doing so, they gained their freedom. However, slavery did not end in Kentucky until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1865. With the end of slavery many African Americans found themselves in difficult circumstances. In 1860, blacks made up 20.4% of Kentucky's population. A decade later the percentage was 16.8. This decline continued well into the 20th century. Currently, Africans Americans make up about 7% of Kentucky's population.

While African American research has some major drawbacks in the way of extant records, by no means is a black genealogy impossible to achieve. In fact, through oral traditions many families have an excellent link with the past. The Kentucky Historical Society Library is pleased to provide the following lists of the most-asked questions and their answers regarding African American research in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

1. What pre-Civil War records exist for Kentucky African Americans?  
There are some documents to help in the research of black heritage in the pre-1865 era.
2. Are there any court records that pertain to African Americans?  
In the county court records one may find wills that name slaves who are either given to a family member or set free.
3. What other records may be found in the county court records?
  - Manumission (a legal document freeing a slave) documents. The owner's and the slave's names are noted.
  - County court order books may also refer to slaveholders and their slaves.
4. What about slave marriage records?  
Marriages for slaves were not recognized by law. But, slave marriages often would be noted by the owners in a family Bible. Family Bibles also contain birth and death information on the servants within a particular household. It was customary for many slaveholders to note the births and deaths of slaves along with family members.

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5. Are there any official birth and death records for Kentucky slaves?  
Yes, for the period of 1852-1861, birth and death records were compiled as a part of Kentucky vital statistics. These records give the names of the slaves, their owners, the date of birth, and the parents of the slave, if known. These records are the oldest recorded state government statistics for African Americans in Kentucky. The Kentucky Historical Society has an alphabetized name list of the vital statistics file for easier access. Also check the index to vital statistics for birth and death records from 1911 to the present. This index is located in the library of the Kentucky Historical Society and in other institutions throughout the state. Please note that the majority of African Americans took the surname of their masters as their own.
6. What about military records?  
From the Civil War era (1861-1865) to the present, African Americans are listed in the muster rolls of the U.S. military.
7. Are there private records that will help in African American research?  
Yes. Look through family letters, photographs, business transactions, journals, and social organization lists. You may be surprised at what you find in private collections.
8. Are there African American genealogical records in the collections of schools, colleges, and universities?  
Yes. Alumni lists may prove to be invaluable in your research. Also be sure to check the oral history collections of university libraries. Oral history in African American families is one of the best sources for hard-to-find information.
9. Are there any federal government records that would aid in African American research?  
Yes, there are the records of the U.S. census for 1850 and 1860 which name the owners, the sex and the age of the slaves. However, these census records do not give the names of individual slaves.
10. What about other census records?  
African Americans are listed in the U.S. census reports from 1870 to the present. Free blacks were listed in earlier census records.
11. Are there other government records besides census information?  
Yes. There are records from the Freedmen's Bureau, an organization established in 1865 to assist former slaves. The Freedmen's Bureau ceased operation in 1872.
12. Are there local court records besides marriages, wills, or deeds that might be helpful to the African American genealogist?  
Yes. Check for business licenses, tax lists, and mortgage books. Do not overlook any of the court records. Check the court records index at the county courts for names of relatives.
13. Are there any histories on African Americans in Kentucky?  
Yes. There are a number of informative works on black Kentuckians. Examples are:
  - Marion B. Lucas and George Wright. *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*. 2 vols. Kentucky Historical Society. Frankfort, Kentucky. 1992.
  - Ivan McDougale. *Slavery in Kentucky*. Negro Universities Press. Westport, Connecticut. 1970.
  - J. Winston Coleman. *Slavery Times in Kentucky*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina. 1940.

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- Lowell H. Harrison. *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky*. University Press of Kentucky. Lexington, Kentucky. 1975.
- Victor B. Howard. *Black Liberation in Kentucky: Emancipation and Freedom, 1862-1884*. University Press of Kentucky. Lexington, Kentucky. 1983.
- Alice A. Dunnigan. *The Fascinating Story of Black Kentuckians: Their Heritage and Tradition*. Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, Inc. Washington, D.C. 1982.
- *Kentucky's Black Heritage*. Kentucky Commission on Human Rights. Frankfort, Kentucky. 1971.

The pursuit of African American genealogy and history in Kentucky is one of the most interesting topics in the Commonwealth. Remember to utilize as many records as possible in your research. You may open up an entire new world of your family's past.

November 2008